

## Determinants of Support for European Integration: The case of Bulgaria

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# Determinants of Support for European Integration

## The Case of Bulgaria



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### ABSTRACT

The electorate's ability to influence the European agenda through European elections and national referenda has led to a close inspection of public attitudes by both academics and politicians. Taking a micro-level approach, this article contributes to the larger literature on the formation of public attitudes and aims at identifying the factors that influence public attitudes towards European integration in Bulgaria, one of the new member states. We use a national survey and rely upon utilitarian, value-based and heuristic factors to test several hypotheses. Although our data confirm the argument that support is higher in countries with lower opportunity costs of transferring sovereignty to the European Union, we also find that EU membership is assessed by projecting potential benefits for future generations rather than self-centered expectations of immediate returns.

### KEY WORDS

- Bulgaria
- economic performance
- European integration
- national government
- public attitudes

## Introduction

The political agenda of Bulgarian governments in the post-communist era has been simultaneously driven by a difficult political, economic and social transition and by accession to the European Union (EU). Bulgaria applied for EU membership in 1995, started the accession negotiations in 2000, and became an EU member state on 1 January 2007. Failure to introduce necessary reforms in key areas, in particular in the judicial system, by successive Bulgarian governments led to the country's exclusion from the 2004 accession wave and to a temporary freezing of accession negotiations in 2005. Despite difficulties in meeting the Copenhagen accession criteria and subsequent delays in the accession negotiations, public support has not withered. According to Eurobarometer surveys, Bulgarian public support for EU membership has been constantly high throughout the post-communist period. Following accession, although positive views on the benefits of membership have dropped, 60% Bulgarians continue to think highly of the EU and 55% of all Bulgarians think that their country's membership is a good thing (Eurobarometer 67, spring 2007). Consequently, Bulgaria rates as one of the most pro-European EU member states.

This article contributes to the literature on public support for European integration by using a case-study approach on Bulgaria, a country that has been subjected to comparatively little research among the Central and East European states. Taking a micro-level view while checking for macro-economic variables, we search for explanations behind the high levels of support for European integration in Bulgaria. We base our article on a unique data set, collected six months before the country became an EU member. We compared the data from this pre-accession survey with a post-accession Eurobarometer analysis, to account for changes in Bulgarian public's attitudes. The results show that, although Bulgarians have a low opinion of their country's economic performance and state institutions, they assess the potential of EU membership by looking into the future instead of focusing on immediate, personal benefits.

## Literature review

The literature on public support for European integration identifies an array of determinants of individual attitudes towards the integration process, such as expectations about economic costs and benefits, cultural characteristics, personal values and beliefs, party allegiance, and the popularity of incumbent governments. For the purposes of this study, three categories of factors are relevant: utilitarian, value-based and heuristic.

Utilitarian theories look at the collective or individual costs and benefits of integration. These theories reveal that an average European evaluates the Union according to his or her country's economic performance and role in international relations (Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993), the volume of trade among EU members and net national returns from the EU budget (Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993; Anderson and Reichert, 1996). Positive attitudes also depend upon the individual's ability to adapt to, and benefit from, market liberalization (Anderson and Reichert, 1996; Gabel, 1998a). EU citizens form attitudes toward EU membership that are consistent with their occupation-based economic interests (Gabel, 1998b). An individual's level of support is also related to the nation's security and trade interests within the EU and the individual's potential to benefit from liberalized markets (Gabel and Palmer, 1995). Studies on Central and Eastern Europe have found that 'winners' from transition as well as supporters of the free market appear more likely to support EU membership (Tucker et al., 2002; Christin, 2005). Although individual and regional characteristics influence Central and East European attitudes towards integration, greater weight is placed upon the benefits from liberation and integration than on the potential gains from redistribution (Doyle and Fidrmuc, 2006).

Public opinion is also determined by 'value-based' factors, such as identification with one's nation, as well as one's political beliefs and values. Inglehart (1977) argued that post-materialist political values determine support for international integration. Recent studies, however, showed that post-materialist variables have little or no effect on subjective evaluations of EU membership (Janssen, 1991; Anderson and Reichert, 1996; Gabel, 1998a). Moreover, scholars have found that national contextual factors (i.e. type of capitalist system or welfare state) condition or limit the impact of individual-level factors, such as ideology (Brinegar and Jolly, 2005). Nevertheless, concerns about the EU's democratic deficit, the quality of the democratic process and its institutional framework appear to shape public attitudes (Rohrschneider, 2002; Karp et al., 2003). More specifically, in the process of democratization in Central and Eastern Europe, a relatively slow pace of reform and beliefs in democratic norms, the market economy and human rights were found to positively influence support towards integration (Christin, 2005; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2006). Whereas for average West Europeans concerns over the loss of national identity may lead to Euroscepticism (Carey, 2002; McLaren, 2002; Dulphy and Manigand, 2004), for Central and East Europeans, European integration is seen as a recognition of their 'Europeanness' and, as such, it carries a certainty of 'belonging' (Verdery, 1996; Schopflin, 2000).

A third strand of the literature maintains that citizens use proxies, or 'shortcuts', when they are called upon to make decisions on issues about

which they have little or no information. On the basis of Eurobarometer data on seven West European countries, Anderson (1998) finds evidence that citizens tend to look to their governments or their parties when deciding whether to support European integration. In a more general context, other scholars show that citizens tend to be ill informed about abstract international issues (Huckfeldt et al., 1995). Therefore, individuals rely on their informal social environment such as friends, acquaintances, colleagues and neighbors when called upon to evaluate such issues.

### Theories and hypotheses

Although party competition has been argued to negatively influence support towards integration in Central and East European countries (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2006), this was not a factor in the Bulgarian context. Prior to the 2005 national elections, Bulgarian politics were characterized by an elite consensus over EU accession (Dimitrova and Dragneva, 2001; Giatzidis, 2004), which induced successive governments to maintain integration as a top priority on their agenda. The public was presented with a rather coherent discourse on European integration. In this context, and based upon previous findings that incumbent popularity and voter assessment of government performance influence public support for European integration (Franklin et al., 1994; Franklin et al., 1995), one could conceivably explain Bulgarian public support for EU membership through government popularity. However, in the fall of 2006, two-thirds of the Bulgarians did not trust their national government (Eurobarometer 65). National politicians are often seen as untrustworthy, corrupt and driven by personal interests. Hence, support for EU accession cannot be explained by the government rate of approval. On the contrary, Bulgarians might hope that Brussels would monitor the activities of their national government. Based on these arguments and the observation of Bulgarians' low trust in their national government, we formulate a first hypothesis (H1): low trust in national government translates into high support for European integration. This viewpoint follows the thesis that the worse the country's situation, the higher the support for the EU (Christin, 2005), but it challenges some of the results of previous studies on Central and Eastern Europe (Ehin, 2001) as well as some research concerning West European states.

The second hypothesis deals with the relationship between a person's political values and his or her support for integration. Scholars who study Central and Eastern Europe suggest that democratic and free market values, positive attitudes towards minorities and liberal principles increase support

for European integration (Cichowski, 2000; Ehin, 2001; Tucker et al., 2002; Slomczynski and Shabad, 2003). Hence, apart from beliefs in economic benefits, individuals perceive EU membership as a way of consolidating freedom and democracy in their countries. EU requirements, such as the rule of law, respect for human rights and respect for minorities, meet expectations for good governance, transparency and the irreversibility of reforms. Support for EU membership is therefore related to liberal democratic values (see also Schimmelfenning, 2001). Such expectations are not unreasonable – scholars (see Grabbe, 2006) reveal the benefits of EU conditionality in terms of both political and economic developments in Central and Eastern Europe. Identification with Europe, or Europeanization, is a positive determinant of support for EU membership (White et al., 2002). Strong backing of EU accession at the beginning of these countries' transition period, when information about the EU was scarce, was essentially based on the systems of values attached to the idea of Europe. In contrast to their countries, which were perceived as provincial, underdeveloped and authoritarian, 'Europe' was seen as cosmopolitan, prosperous and democratic. Whereas the EU's democratic deficit and the quality of democratic processes within its institutional framework are matters of concern for a Western European, for citizens living in Eastern Europe the state of national democracy still lags too far behind to worry about democratic processes in Brussels (Rohrschneider, 2002; Karp et al., 2003). Data for Bulgaria are therefore expected to confirm that individuals with strong beliefs in democracy are more supportive of integration (H2).

Citizens perceive national economic factors as belonging to the category of utilitarian factors able to influence their attitude towards membership. Previous studies show that attitudes towards European integration are positively related to national economic conditions, the timing of entry into the Union and length of membership in it (Anderson and Kaltenhaler, 1996), a low inflation rate (Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993) and the individual's ability to adapt to and benefit from market liberalization (Gabel and Palmer, 1995; Anderson and Reichert, 1996; Gabel, 1998a). Would a person with a high regard for the national economy be in favor of or against EU membership? Suppose that a hypothetical citizen, Mr X, thinks that the standard of living, unemployment, inequality and economic growth in Bulgaria are acceptable, but he is afraid that the economy could be destabilized by unfettered foreign competition. He therefore opposes Bulgaria's membership. Another hypothetical citizen, Ms Y, who also thinks highly of the Bulgarian economy, might presume that the economy could successfully withstand foreign competition and would even benefit from larger markets. In contrast to Mr X, Ms Y supports EU membership. Which of the two views prevails? Ms Y might be a more likely model of the average citizen because her view

is supported by the economic theory that trade liberalization improves a country's welfare in the long run. Answers to the open-ended question in the questionnaire show that Bulgarians assess integration in terms of long-term benefits rather than immediate returns. Thus, our data are expected to show that an individual's support for integration is positively related to his or her perception of the country's economic performance (H3).

The next hypothesis examines the impact of 'informal social ties' on opinion formation. Some studies have shown that individuals do not form their opinions on the basis of a personal effort to acquire proper information, but rely strongly on other members of their social environment for guidance (Nowak et al., 1990). One may expect that such a hypothesis will hold when the marginal cost of acquiring information is high and the marginal private benefit is low. Thus, information that is of great social value but low individual benefit has the characteristics of a public good: it is too costly to be provided by an individual but, once it is provided, no one can be excluded from the benefits of it. We expect to find a positive relationship between the pro-EU attitude of an individual's social group and the individual's support for EU membership (H4).

Summarizing, we hypothesize that support for EU membership is (H1) negatively related to trust in national government; (H2) positively related to an individual's beliefs in democratic norms; (H3) positively related to citizens' opinion of the economic performance of their country; and finally (H4) positively related to the attitude of the social group to which an individual belongs.

## Variables, data and model

Some of the variables in our analysis are equal-weight indexes incorporating several questions. (Other than equal-weight structures were also considered and it was found that the results were robust.) The purpose of constructing composite variables is twofold: to increase the variability in the data, and to obtain a more accurate measure of the variable in question by quantifying several of its distinct aspects.<sup>1</sup>

'EU support' is the dependent variable. It measures the individual's support for his or her country's membership in the European Union. Janssen (1991: 443) notes that 'the picture one gets depends heavily on the indicator one uses to measure support.' 'EU support' is constructed as an index based on three questions (see Tables A1, A2 and A3 in the Web appendix<sup>2</sup>). All questions in this index are positively correlated and the index is highly correlated with each of its components; a principal factor analysis reveals that

all components load into the same factor (correlation tables and factor analysis are available on request).

The variable 'Confidence in home government' reflects the respondent's trust in the country's political class. The variable 'Confidence in EU officials' is based on the question: 'On a scale of 1 to 100, rank your confidence in EU officials.' This question does not assume that the respondent is familiar with particular personalities, but refers to the EU political class as a whole. 'Democratic values' is a composite variable based on a set of three questions referring to pluralism, the importance of elections and attitudes towards the different constituencies of power; for instance, prioritizing government over parliament is considered a rather authoritarian view. The variable 'Home economy' captures the respondent's perception of how the country's economy is performing. It is the sum of six questions about the performance of the economy as a whole, unemployment, the standard of living, inflation and income inequality. The variable 'Group of friends' measures to what extent the respondent's social environment favors EU membership; the source question for this variable is 'What percentage of your friends do you think would support your country's EU membership?' A number of socioeconomic variables were also part of the survey and used as 'controls.'

Most of the previous research uses Eurobarometer data, which are based on answers of the 'yes/no/don't know' type. Brinegar et al. (2004) point out that such data are insufficiently detailed for quantitative analysis. Our survey allows the answers to vary on a scale of 1 to 100, to provide room for nuances and diversity in opinions.<sup>3</sup> The survey is based on a stratified random sample of 1016 citizens. We encountered the problem of missing values in the data to an extent that it needed to be addressed. The literature (e.g. King et al., 2001; Little and Rubin, 2002) identifies a few distinct types of missing values, depending on whether the probability of occurrence of a missing value is correlated with observed or unobserved data. Unfortunately, there is no reliable test for determining which of the types is present, since any test should be based on the very missing values. Therefore, the nature of the problem can best be determined by reasoning alone. Since the questions in this survey are not of a sensitive nature, it is reasonable to believe that the respondents have no particular motivation to refuse to answer some questions. Therefore, we can safely assume that our missing data are of either the 'missing at random' or the 'missing completely at random' type. In any case, a 'multiple imputation by chained equations' method is applicable (Van Buuren et al., 1999). This method replaces the missing values in the data set with values obtained from cross-regressing all the variables.

We construct the following regression equation: 'EU support' is a linear function of the variables 'Confidence in home government', 'Confidence in



EU officials', 'Democratic values', 'Home economy', 'Group of friends', the person's employment status, some control variables, plus a stochastic error term. The control variables are Age, Education and Gender. The first column in Table 1 presents a 'list-wise deletion' OLS model, where only the observations with no missing values are included. The second column presents a similar specification, with the control variables Age, Gender and Education removed. The next two columns, (3) and (4), use the same specifications as before, but with multiple imputations for the missing values.

The variable 'Group of friends' may raise some suspicion concerning its exogeneity with respect to the explained variable 'EU support,' since a person might choose friends who share similar political views or, conversely, might form political views under the influence of his or her friends. A

**Table 1** Regression results (*p*-values in parentheses): (1), (2) OLS with 'list-wise deletion' of missing values; (3), (4) OLS with missing values calculated using the method of multiple imputations by chained equations. All regressions use heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors

	(1) <i>EU support</i>	(2) <i>EU support</i>	(3) <i>EU support</i>	(4) <i>EU support</i>
Confid. in home gov.	-0.417 (.005)	-0.439 (.003)	-0.257 (.049)	-0.282 (.026)
Confidence in EU	1.293 (.000)	1.291 (.000)	1.139 (.000)	1.144 (.000)
Democratic values	0.112 (.002)	0.114 (.002)	0.0902 (.004)	0.0904 (.004)
Home economy	0.0605 (.019)	0.0652 (.010)	0.0625 (.008)	0.0666 (.004)
Group of friends	1.353 (.000)	1.361 (.000)	1.623 (.000)	1.633 (.000)
Unempl. (E = 0, U = 1)	12.20 (.096)	12.15 (.097)	0.167 (.979)	-0.104 (.987)
Age categories	-0.422 (.818)	—	-1.252 (.444)	—
Gender (M = 0, F = 1)	2.572 (.608)	—	-0.658 (.884)	—
Education categories	-1.097 (.663)	—	-0.666 (.771)	—
Constant	40.47 (.001)	36.36 (.000)	35.20 (.002)	28.18 (.000)
Observations	725	729	1016	1016
Adjusted <i>R</i> -squared	.472	.474	.477	.478

Durbin–Wu–Hausman test is performed (Davidson and MacKinnon, 1993) and the null hypothesis that this variable is exogenous is not rejected.

## Findings

The coefficient of the variable ‘Confidence in home government’ came out negative and statistically significant. This indicates that Bulgarian citizens who are dissatisfied with their political leaders’ performance tend to be more in favor of EU integration. This finding is in line with Sánchez-Cuenca (2000), who argues that distrust of domestic authorities and trust in EU institutions are interdependent. This is not to say, though, that national governments should worsen their performance and credibility for a pro-integration policy. Such an interpretation of these results would be both inaccurate and unfortunate.

Eurobarometer data confirm that Bulgarians have low confidence in their national institutions and that this attitude persists over time (Eurobarometer 65, spring and fall 2006). In spring 2006, confidence in the Bulgarian Parliament was only 17%, in the government 24% and in the judiciary 20%, the lowest figures of all the countries included in Eurobarometer surveys; confidence in political parties was only 10%. Consequently, the average Bulgarian has specific expectations about the impact that EU membership would have on the country’s governance. Answers to the open-ended question in our survey show that Bulgarians expect EU membership to ‘lower corruption,’ bring about respect for ‘norms,’ induce ‘order’ and ‘change mentalities for the better.’ Although it is not clear how Bulgarians expect these changes to happen, the data certainly suggest that dissatisfaction with the national political elite is an important factor inducing a pro-accession attitude. This confirms Sánchez-Cuenca’s thesis that the presence of political corruption at the national level has a positive impact upon support for European integration (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000), as well as Christin’s findings that a relatively slow pace of democratization leads to higher support for integration (Christin, 2005).

The variable ‘Confidence in EU officials’ is significant and has a positive coefficient. Taking into account that the scale of the variable ‘Confidence in home government’ is three times the scale of ‘Confidence in EU officials,’ the magnitudes of the two coefficients show that the credibility of EU officials is a determinant of support that is just as important as trust in domestic political leaders. This result to some extent leads to a reconsideration of McLaren’s finding that attitudes to European integration are influenced by perceptions of EU institutions rather than perceptions of national institutions (McLaren, 2007).

It appears that, although Bulgarians distrust their governments and politicians, they trust Brussels to monitor domestic authorities. Analyses based on Eurobarometer data show a close correlation between the awareness Bulgarians have of the EU and their trust in it. In spring 2006, Bulgarians' level of trust in European institutions was as follows: confidence in the European Parliament 51%, in the European Commission 44%, in the Council 41%, in the European Central Bank 45%, and in the European Court of Justice 39% (Eurobarometer 65.2). One year later, following Bulgaria's accession, trust in European institutions had not changed significantly (Eurobarometer 67, spring 2007). Membership, therefore, does not seem to have changed Bulgarians' view of EU institutions. However, interestingly enough, Bulgarians' trust in the EU as a whole is on average lower than the EU average by 3% (54% compared with 57%).

The positive sign for 'Democratic values' indicates that people who hold democratic views are more in favor of integration. Related to the low degree of trust in national governments and a relatively high degree of trust in EU officials, this indicator also seems to suggest that the respondents believe that, following EU accession, the regime in their country will consolidate its democratic features owing to conditionality and constant monitoring from Brussels. In the literature, it has been suggested that EU conditionality has fostered political reforms in terms of transparency, integrity, rule of law and the protection of minorities (Grabbe, 2006). Our qualitative data further support this argument (Bulgarians expect 'less corruption,' 'less bureaucracy,' 'norms' and 'laws'; Roma citizens expect 'their life will improve'). In spring 2007, the majority of Bulgarians viewed the European Union as 'democratic' (78%), 'modern' (76%) and 'protective' (Eurobarometer 67).

The coefficient of the variable 'Home economy' is significant and positive, showing that those individuals who believe that Bulgaria's economy is performing well are likely to be in favor of European integration. However, the survey also shows that the average rate of trust in the country's economy is only about 17%, which indicates that the vast majority believe that their economy is performing poorly. The disproportion between the 17% average evaluation of the home economy and the overall level of support for EU membership, which in Bulgaria is about 60%, is striking. These facts, together with the low value of the regression coefficient of the 'Home economy' variable, indicate the relatively low importance of macroeconomic considerations in explaining the total variability in 'EU support.' This suggests that macroeconomic considerations, though positively related to public attitudes, explain only a small part of the process of opinion formation. For most of the respondents, the reasons for being in favor or against membership are other than concerns about the country's economy. However, people expect improvements at the macroeconomic level from accession. Eurobarometer

65.2 (spring 2006) found that 48% of Bulgarians believed that the EU played a positive role in determining the economic situation in Bulgaria. Our result suggests only that public opinion about the performance of the home economy is not a major determinant of support. It also indicates that good domestic economic policies make for a good pro-European policy.

The extent of pro-integration attitudes seems to depend significantly on a person's social environment, as the coefficient of the variable 'Group of friends' indicates. The positive sign of this coefficient suggests that this kind of opinion formation is important in Bulgarian culture. Eurobarometer 65.2 shows that Bulgarians on average spend 30% of their socializing time discussing EU-related topics, which may explain why the heuristic factor in our model is so significant.

A person's employment status appears to be hardly relevant to opinion formation in relation to the EU. Since qualitative data show that the opening of borders to labor migration is a determinant of support, one would think that people who are unemployed would look forward to the liberalization of labor markets that would supposedly come about with accession. The prospect of new jobs abroad is seen both as an opportunity ('for the young,' 'for better income') as well as a problem ('the young will leave'). Bulgarians looked positively on accession, especially since they perceive an increased opportunity to cross borders freely ('looking for jobs'). On the other hand, it is conceivable that the great majority of potentially migrating workers are people who already have a job at home but are looking for higher wages abroad, rather than individuals who have not found employment in their own country.

Besides the variables included in our quantitative analysis, the open-ended question in the survey provided interesting insights. Many of the answers indicate that support for accession is driven by the hope for a better future and an improvement in the administrative and political life of the country ('less bureaucracy,' 'less corruption,' 'more norms,' 'less crime'). The impact of accession is seen in terms of future benefits rather than present ones: although older generations fear accession ('high prices' but 'low pensions'), they see it as an opportunity for the young, 'our kids.' For them, support for accession is conceived in terms of sacrifice for the betterment of future generations rather than self-centered and narrow-minded cost/benefit considerations.

## Conclusion

As discovered by other studies on countries plagued by political instability, corruption or sectarian interests (e.g. Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000; Christin, 2005; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2006), lack of trust in national governments is

a strong determinant of support for integration. Combined with trust in EU officials and the belief in democratic values as determinants of support, this suggests that Brussels is perceived as capable of raising the level of good governance and lowering corruption by placing additional checks upon national politics. These findings further support both Sánchez-Cuenca and Christin's general thesis that positive attitudes towards integration are higher in countries with lower opportunity costs of transferring sovereignty to the EU, owing to either political instability, the slow pace of reforms, inefficient political actors and state institutions or poor economic performance. They also relate to arguments in the larger literature on East European politics according to which individuals in the young democracies of Eastern Europe rely upon external rather than national actors for solutions (see e.g. Verdery, 1996; Tismăneanu, 1998; Schopflin, 2000).

Although economic performance and individual competitiveness have been identified as determinants of EU support by previous research, in this case a person's employment status appears as a weak determinant of support for European accession. Though economic benefits from EU membership ('more jobs,' 'higher income') are expected, they are anticipated to be a result of labor mobility across borders rather than of an improvement in the national economy. In other words, as far as the economic dimension goes, support for membership is driven by perceived individual benefits. Moreover, the average Bulgarian seems to want to join the EU for non-economic reasons that are at least as important as those related to the nation's economy, one of which is the perceived benefits for future generations rather than immediate returns. Therefore, although the losers from transition perceive themselves as losers from integration (as argued by Tucker et al., 2002), they are likely to support integration for the benefit of their children.

Overall, the average electorate's support for integration is based upon expectations for the future, being linked either to Brussels' ability to improve good governance at the national level or to the individual's own ability to take advantage of the opportunities granted by EU membership. Although some of these findings carry implications for the general study of public attitudes towards integration, others may be case specific.

## Notes

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- 1 The Web appendix (at <http://ccolonescu.googlepages.com/data>) provides the questions that are used to construct each variable, as well as the method of construction. Summary statistics of the variables are also reported there.
- 2 See <http://ccolonescu.googlepages.com/data>.
- 3 Table A2 in the Web appendix provides an excerpt from the survey instrument.

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